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Translating Nancy Drew from Fiction to Film

Bonnie Brennen
Marquette University, bonnie.brennen@marquette.edu

CHAPTER 23

Translating Nancy Drew from Print to Film

Diana Beeson and Bonnie Brennen

Nancy Drew has the distinction of remaining a teenager over a span of more than six decades. She sprang Athena-like out of the head of Edward Stratemeyer in 1930, but her stout heart and generous mind were steeled by Mildred Wirt Benson, who wrote twenty-three of the first thirty books in the series. Nancy, however, was not the creative ideation of a single set of parents. During her sixty-five years as a teenage sleuth, a multitude of authors have assumed the pen name Carolyn Keene, writing new mysteries and revising the old ones, to maintain Nancy's status as a contemporary of her reading public.

This essay looks at the changing Nancy Drew as her character shifts over time on the pages of her books and as her characterization undergoes treatment by Hollywood. It focuses specifically on the second book in the series, *The Hidden Staircase* (1930), written by Benson. A film of the same name was released in 1939, and some twenty years later, in 1959, Simon & Schuster issued a revised and updated version of the book.

An examination of Nancy Drew in two versions of the same book and a film presumably based on the book will demonstrate that Nancy Drew, as a fictional character, is anything but static, enduring, and unchanging—although that's how most of her audience remembers her. For most readers, however avidly they read Nancy Drew mysteries, their acquaintance with her was a relatively brief

interlude in their recreational reading careers. After a summer or a single year in grade school or junior high, they moved on to other mysteries or other kinds of books.

Readers who entered grade school after 1959 probably became acquainted with the "modernized" postwar Nancy Drew of the 1950s. Older readers, and younger ones who became beneficiaries of the originals from the 1930s and 1940s, became acquainted with the Nancy Drew of the Depression and World War II.

In the Nancy Drew mysteries of the 1930s, our sleuth is intelligent, honest, self-confident, kind, and courageous. As an independent young woman, she actively challenges the role of women in American society. Nancy Drew works alone and frequently acts outside generally accepted boundaries. She has an exceptional relationship with her father, who treats her as an equal partner rather than as a subordinate child.

Beginning in 1959, thirty-four of the Nancy Drew mysteries were "updated" and revised. Some of the most obvious racist and antisemitic representations were removed, along with outmoded sexual stereotypes. The language was simplified and plots were redesigned, presumably to appeal to more contemporary audiences. Yet we would suggest that in their attempts to revitalize Nancy Drew much of what makes the series so exceptional was lost.

The simplified stories exclude many of the cultural signposts and messages relevant to the 1930s. Nancy's independent character is softened and in these newer texts she relies much more heavily upon others for help and guidance. The post-1959 editions encode very different messages which reflect the mores, expectations, and experiences of postwar American society.

In the 1930 version of *The Hidden Staircase*, Nancy Drew is the resourceful and efficient only child of attorney Carson Drew. Nancy confronts dangerous situations, befriends those less fortunate, and ultimately solves an important mystery. In the opening sequence of the mystery she is home alone. Her father is at work and the housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, has the day off. Nancy is threatened by Nathan Gombet, an intruder who demands to see her father. Although she is frightened by the man's strange conduct, Nancy faces him boldly and successfully handles the situation. Throughout the original book, Nancy is depicted as cool and collected in the face of danger.

The intelligent and independent Nancy Drew mirrors the changing status of American women during the first half of the twentieth century. Like other intelligent women during her era, she challenges traditional notions regarding her role in American society. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 was the culmination of an eighty-year struggle for political equality. Women used their newly won vote to advance a number of social changes. They focused on child labor reform, standards for pure food and drugs, and conservation activities. By the end of the 1920s, twenty-five percent of American women were employed outside the home (Women's Bureau, 35). Many fought actively for equality in the work place and in the home. Writers of fiction during the 1920s and 1930s frequently depicted this new breed of American women as confident, self-assured, and independent.

Like other fictional women of the era, Nancy does not wish to be sheltered and protected; she strives to be self-reliant and brave and wants to be treated as an active and equal member of society. Nancy's independence is supported by her father, Carson. Nancy's mother died when she was three, and Carson has raised her as a single parent. Throughout the original books, he repeatedly encourages her talent for digging into interesting cases. Nancy and Carson interact more like friends and colleagues than father and daughter. Nancy goes to Carson for support and advice but ultimately works alone. She does not rely on the police or any other authority figures.

Reflecting a prevalent ethic of the era that those in the upper and upper middle classes had a social responsibility toward those less fortunate, Nancy regularly befriends poor but honest women who are eternally grateful for her help and guidance. Readers of *The Hidden Staircase* are reminded of Nancy's kind nature in references to women she had previously aided, such as Allie and Grace Horner. In this mystery, Nancy is asked for help by Rosemary Turnbull, one of two elderly sisters, who hears noises and sees shadows in the home she shares with her sister. Nancy agrees to try to solve the mystery and, with revolver in hand, joins the elderly and frightened women. During her stay at their mansion, Nancy also experiences unexplainable music and shadows, disappearing possessions, and strange footsteps during the night. After a few days, she becomes frustrated and feels almost humiliated that she hasn't discovered even a single clue. Of course, our very patient Nancy perseveres and,

even when she learns that her father is missing, resolves not to leave the mansion until she has solved the mystery.

Discovering that Nathan Gombet owns the old stone house directly behind the mansion and threatened the Turnbull sisters after they would not sell him their mansion for an extremely low price, Nancy decides that she must investigate Gombet's house without his knowledge. She tells no one of her plans, and after observing Gombet leave in the cloak of darkness she enters his house alone through an open window. She discovers a hidden staircase that connects the two houses and proves that Gombet is the ghost responsible for frightening the Turnbull sisters and kidnapping her father. Nancy consults the police only after she has solved the mystery and needs their help in apprehending the criminal.

Nancy in the Cold War Era

In contrast, the Nancy Drew of the 1959 version of *The Hidden Staircase* is depicted as far less independent and self-confident and relies far more heavily on officials for help and guidance. For example, in the original book, Nancy does not interact with the housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, at all; however, in the updated mystery, Gruen is an active participant in the story. Readers are told: "Mrs. Gruen had lived with the Drews since Nancy was three years old. At that time Mrs. Drew had passed away and Hannah had become like a second mother to Nancy. There was a deep affection between the two, and Nancy confided all her secrets to the understanding housekeeper" (2).

Throughout the book Nancy consults with Hannah Gruen; readers understand that since she was a young girl Nancy has found solace in talking to the housekeeper, who always gives her good advice. Nancy also gets an abundance of support and assistance from the police. She frequently phones in to give them clues she has found and to report anything suspicious. The police track down suspects and help Nancy interpret her leads, and they serve in an official capacity, guarding the haunted mansion and ultimately rescuing her father and apprehending the criminals. Whereas the original Nancy Drew frequently worked outside the law, the new Nancy is a law-abiding citizen. When the updated Nancy realizes that she needs to investigate the other mansion, which happens to be for sale,

her friend Helen is "horrified" that she might break in. Nancy assures her: "No Helen, I'm not going to evade the law. I'll go to the realtor who is handling the property and ask him to show me the place" (143).

When it at first becomes unlikely that they will obtain the key, seemingly quite out of character, Nancy gives up and continues to search for other clues. It is clear that this Nancy Drew would never break the law.

It is not surprising that the 1959 version of Nancy Drew has a strong regard for authority. Postwar American society, with its conservative political and economic agenda, focuses on cooperation, law, and conformity. Individuals are continually urged to obey the rules, respect the law, and find legal solutions to problems rather than to take the law into their own hands.

During this era, the Cold War is seen as a dominating world presence that for the most part cancels any hopes for peace. Even socialists who are critical of capitalist society find that because of Stalinism they must align themselves with the West against the Communist bloc. The critics who do attack contemporary American society focus on its impersonal and bureaucratic tendencies and lament the powerlessness of the people to change an increasingly inhuman system (Pells, 186). Politicians react to frustrations over the spread of communism, labor problems, race riots, and increased cost of living due to inflation by instituting a series of investigations meant to determine the patriotism and reliability of Americans. Workers are forced to sign loyalty oaths and Americans are encouraged to prove that they are law-abiding citizens.

As the middle class becomes an undeniable force, scholars such as David Riesman observe a basic change in the character of contemporary American society. Self-disciplined, self-motivated, inner-directed, independent individuals are devalued, challenged, and rejected. Instead, Americans become other-directed, and their identity is linked to group acceptance and approval. Group pressures and influences become increasingly important, and getting along with others is the goal of many individuals. During this era Americans begin to emphasize conformity and focus on issues of status and prestige (Hardt, 145).

The economic and social advances attained by women during the first part of the twentieth century were seriously jeopardized in

the postwar period. During the Second World War the United States government faced a severe labor shortage and actively recruited women workers for jobs once considered men's work. Women were convinced they could handle jobs as welders, riveters, drill press operators, and foundry workers. There were campaigns for equal pay, pregnancy leaves, and day care facilities. However, as men returned from war, millions of women were fired from their jobs. Campaigns began to convince women that they were no longer needed in the work place. Women were repeatedly told that their place was now in the home and that motherhood offered the most rewarding profession (Gluck, 261; Gabin).

Unlike our sleuth in the original *Hidden Staircase*, in the updated version, Nancy is rarely alone. Hannah Gruen is with her when the villain, now called Nathan Gomber, first comes to call; her friend Helen accompanies her throughout the mystery and is with her when Nancy discovers the hidden staircase. One may speculate that perhaps it was considered "improper" for young women of this era to venture out alone. In the 1959 edition, none of the characters challenge societal norms. Readers are reassured that Nancy's friend Helen is engaged and soon to be married; the two elderly sisters living together in the mansion are replaced in this version with a more traditional mother and her recently widowed daughter. Gone are the ethnic slurs and racial stereotypes; instead of the vicious "colored" servant, in this mystery the accomplice is a man with a "crinkly" ear.

Although the revised books are cleansed of their stereotypical racial distinctions, new categories of judgment emerge which emphasize conformity and group approval. In the updated *Hidden Staircase*, even the villain Nathan Gomber is not really all that bad. Nancy judges him as "the kind of person who stays within the boundaries of the law but whose ethics are questionable" (5).

Although the newer Nancy is helpful and ultimately successful as a detective, efforts are taken to portray her as a "regular" young woman. There are no extended discussions of the unfortunate individuals she has helped. The two women she befriends are relatives of her friend Helen, rather than less fortunate members of the community. Her relationship with Carson Drew is less notable, more like a traditional father and daughter. He is reassuring and helpful, even reminding Nancy to get ready for her upcoming date. Nancy attends

a play and dance with "red-haired, former high school tennis champion" Dirk Jackson. After the date she reflects on the evening and considers "how lucky she was to have Dirk for a date, and what fun it had all been" (16). In the updated mysteries, Nancy Drew is portrayed as a typical teenager who also likes to solve mysteries. She is friendly and helpful, but in no way does she threaten the social expectations and norms of postwar American society.

Transforming Nancy for Film

In both the 1930 and 1959 versions of *The Hidden Staircase*, Nancy Drew's characterization reflects and responds to societal expectations. Her character, at either juncture, would seem to lend itself naturally to film adaptation. She was young, her days were filled with mystery and excitement, she was surrounded by interesting characters, and—perhaps most attractive of all to Hollywood studios—she had a large and dedicated audience.

In 1938 Warner Brothers brought Nancy Drew to the silver screen with results that readers of any of Nancy's literary incarnations would find astonishing and disappointing. All in all, Warner Brothers produced four films. In order of production, they are *Nancy Drew, Detective*, 1938; *Nancy Drew, Reporter*, 1939; *Nancy Drew, Troubleshooter*, 1939; and *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, 1939. The films were so bad that one was cited by Justice Arthur J. Goldberg in a 1962 Supreme Court decision disallowing a practice called block booking under which motion picture distributors required television stations to buy packages of films to get the ones they wanted. In his opinion, Justice Goldberg gave some colorful examples of what television stations had to do under block booking. "Station WTOP in Washington, in order to get such film classics as *Casablanca* and *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, also had to buy *Nancy Drew, Troubleshooter* and *Gorilla Man*" (Lewis, 80). A review of the film *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* from the November 8, 1939, edition of the entertainment newspaper *Variety* begins: "[The] tale is ostensibly a mystery story" (*Variety Film Reviews*). The qualifying word *ostensibly* provides the first clue that the film might take great liberties with the book's characters and plot. The book, after all, is unqualifiedly a mystery. The movie is not. In fact,

there is very little resemblance between the film and the book outside of the title, the names of a few characters, and the fact that in both there is a staircase.

Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase, released in November 1939, was the fourth and last in a series of Nancy Drew films produced by Warner Brothers. The films starred Bonita Granville as Nancy Drew. Granville, the child of vaudevillians, began her show business career at an early age and broke into films because of her uncanny resemblance to a popular fair-haired actress of the 1930s, Ann Harding (Maltin, 100).

Granville played a number of juvenile roles and in 1936 received an Academy Award nomination in the Best Supporting Actress category for her performance in *These Three* (Shale, 320). Granville made fifty-one films before retiring in 1956. Due to the critical acclaim she received for her role in *These Three*, she was most often cast as an unpleasant adolescent before graduating to ingenue roles in a succession of little noted films produced in the 1940s. "Gosh! Wouldn't it be awful," Granville said in an interview in 1940, "if people always remembered me as the worst brat in the movies" (Maltin, 99). Her adeptness at such portrayals is evident in her performance as Nancy Drew. In a later review of the four Nancy Drew films, Melanie Knight wrote: "Acting, said David Hemmings once, isn't thinking, 'it's pretending to be.' Whoever Bonita Granville is 'pretending to be' in these movies, it isn't Nancy Drew" (Knight, 8).

In Benson's 1930 version of the book, Nancy discovers the hidden staircase in an act of cunning desperation at the end of chapter 19. After finding that she is trapped in a locked room on the top floor of the villain's mansion, the chapter ends ominously with the following passage:

> Curiously, Nancy stepped inside the closet and twisted the knob. She thought she heard a clicking noise. Was it only imagination?
>
> Eagerly, she examined the back wall of the closet and interest quickened. In the dim light, she could make out a long crack. She tapped the wall with her knuckles, and it had a hollow sound.
>
> "I believe I've stumbled upon something important," Nancy thought excitedly.
>
> With all her might, she pushed upon the knob. Unexpect-

edly, a spring clicked and the entire side of the closet wall dropped down!

Nancy struggled to maintain her balance, but could not. She toppled forward and fell headlong down a steep flight of stone steps.

A low cry of pain escaped her, then she lay still. (149–150)

The movie treats the discovery quite differently. Instead of finding herself trapped and alone, she is with her friend *Ted* Nickerson. While Nancy Drew, in later books, had a friend named Ned Nickerson, he did not appear in *The Hidden Staircase*. And no one named Ted Nickerson ever appeared in any of the Nancy Drew books. Nevertheless, Ted is a prominent character in the film.

Nancy and Ted are characterized as foils for one another. Ted is sensible, cautious, and a reluctant participant in the exploits that pass for sleuthing in the film. In contrast to Ted, the Nancy of film is flighty and manipulative. She is not invited to help people with the unexplained occurrences in their lives as she is in the book. Rather, she has a zany inability to mind her own business, and it is this quality that gets them into what Ted describes as "a jam."

In both versions of the book, the discovery of the hidden staircase is a cliffhanger used as a device to heighten the narrative tension and create the kind of suspense that draws the reader into the next chapter. In the film, the discovery is devoid of suspense. Instead, the scene is played for laughs. Nancy tries to find the secret entrance to the hidden staircase by pushing on bricks in the mansion's basement; of course, it is Ted who figures out the entrance must open by means of a lever disguised as a coat rack. He pulls the lever as Nancy is pushing on the bricks. The door swings open and Nancy executes a pratfall into the hidden passage, accompanied on the soundtrack by an appropriate clarinet *glissando*. She is seen sitting, legs splayed, firmly planted on her backside. Ted runs to her aid, saying, "You mighta busted your neck."

Nancy delivers the punchline: "I didn't land on my neck."

The scene is played for laughs because the film is a screwball mystery, a genre that descended from the screwball comedy in which suspense is used as a comic device. In 1934 the genre of the screwball mystery was established with the box office hit *The Thin Man*. The film was based on Dashiell Hammett's book and was among the

first to successfully wed detective fiction with screwball comedy. Its commercial success spawned sequels, direct imitations, and variations on similar themes. As film critic Ed Sikov wrote, "Something evidently clicked between the detective drama and the screwball comedy. The studios couldn't make enough of them" (Sikov, 199). Like the western, the musical, the hard-boiled detective drama, and the gangster film, the screwball mystery became a genre unto itself with its own formulae and conventions.

The Thin Man series, along with several other notable screwball mysteries, such as *Topper* and *It's a Wonderful World*, featured some of Hollywood's luminaries. Films such as these were on the studio's A-list, meaning they had the budgets to hire from Hollywood's stable of proven box office draws and develop productions with all the style, sophistication, and polish the genre demanded. The Nancy Drew films, however, were B movies. The films were low budget; the cast was composed of young, unproven Hollywood hopefuls and a smattering of older character actors whose stars had never risen; and due to budget constraints the films were "two-reelers," generally no longer than sixty-five minutes. The B movies of the 1930s were rarely a theater's feature presentation. More commonly, they had second billing on a double feature slate.

On the surface, it might appear that the Nancy Drew films and films such as *Shadow of the Thin Man* have very little in common. In fact, they are quite comparable in that these films contain the classic elements of the screwball mystery genre, including leisure time, depiction of the social "upper crust," romantic or sexual tension created by a seemingly antagonistic couple, resolution of class conflicts, and gender role confusion (Gehring; Schatz, 152, 155, 159; Sikov, 15–22, 29, 92, 106, 158, 173). The Nancy Drew films produced by Warner Brothers in 1938 and 1939 contain all of these elements, thereby transforming Nancy from a capable detective with maturity beyond her years to a screwball comedian.

Leisure time is crucial to the screwball mystery. Not only does it reinforce the depiction of the characters as members of the leisure class, but it helps to explain why they happen to be home when mysterious strangers come to the door and how they have the time to spend their days tracking down clues and pursuing villains.

While leisure time usually connotes elevated social standing, the connection had to be made abundantly clear in the screwball

films of the 1930s since the Depression had reduced the social standing of large numbers of Americans and given them leisure time, not by choice but by circumstance. Screwball mysteries often took place in opulent settings and the amateur sleuths tracked clues with toys of the wealthy, such as fast cars, boats, and even airplanes. These props separated them from those with involuntary leisure time. Their membership in high society also was a plot device whereby they could use their social connections to gain access to crime scenes and privileged information. The characters were wealthy enough to treat public servants, namely the police, like servants.

Leisure time and elevated social standing are consistent with Nancy Drew's literary persona. Her father was a well-respected lawyer, the Drew family employed household help, and Nancy owned a new roadster throughout the Depression. She also had plenty of leisure time and made good use of it. Most of the tales in the books take place during her summer vacation, and if all the mysteries she solved over a sixty-year period were accomplished over the usual seventy-day summer break, she averages more than three solutions per day.

Although these elements are ostensibly consistent with the character in the books, in the film they become distorted. In the books, Nancy has a certain amount of *noblesse oblige*. She is gracious and charitable in all social encounters. In the film, as the daughter of a successful River Heights attorney, she has become slightly spoiled. Her father and her boyfriend do not encourage her sleuthing. They appear merely to tolerate it and humor her because if she gets her own way she is likely to be less of a nuisance.

In Benson's version of *The Hidden Staircase*, there is not so much as a hint of romance in Nancy's life. Outside of her father and the villain, there are no major male characters. Her boyfriend Ned Nickerson isn't introduced until later in the series. It's quite clear that Nancy is single-minded in her purpose to succeed as a detective, and at least in this early work there is no room for anything that might obscure her objective. In the film, however, Ted Nickerson is a pivotal character. He is with Nancy every step of the way. Their relationship is antagonistic on the surface. They trade verbal jabs, but throughout, as is consistent with the screwball mystery genre, the viewer knows that the teasing is all in good fun and, at some point, their attraction to each other will be revealed.

The prototype for this relationship as a comic device was established by Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in Frank Capra's classic screwball comedy *It Happened One Night*. The device employs characterization of a couple with differing values, backgrounds, and temperaments. They seem never to agree, yet one always goes along with the other's plans, reluctantly and against his or her better judgment. The implication, of course, is that the recalcitrant character is not motivated by judgment, but rather by forces more biological in nature. Whether or not there is closure through a proposal or marriage, it always becomes apparent that the couple's battle of wits will dissolve into mutual affection (Schatz, 152).

In *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, that moment comes as Ted and Nancy are making their way through the secret passage that connects the Turnbull sisters' mansion with its twin, owned by the villain. They are impeded by a puddle of water. Ted suggests it might be a deep, water-filled hole, to which Nancy replies, "Let's find out."

Ready on the draw with a verbal jab, Ted responds, "Find out? *You* find out. You won't sink with those boats you're wearing."

Nancy braves her way across the puddle, but upon hearing a croaking frog she screams with terror and rushes back to the safety of Ted's waiting arms. They enjoy a brief but tender embrace before realizing no official truce has been called in the battle of the sexes. They self-consciously disengage and Ted fires the first salvo in the new campaign with the taunt, "Don't tell me you're a-ascared of frogs."

While Ted takes occasional potshots at Nancy's physical and emotional frailties, Nancy retaliates by indicating to Ted that his social background makes him not quite worthy of her. Ted, unlike Nancy, does not have leisure time. He has to work over the summer, delivering ice. After Ted makes a delivery to the Drew household, Nancy says, "I do wish you'd chosen a job for the summer that was a little more genteel." To make her case, as well as to point out that she and Ted normally travel in different social circles, she says, "What do you suppose people will think when they ask, 'Who's your friend?' and I say, 'The iceman'?"

The seemingly mismatched couple from different class backgrounds is another convention of the screwball mystery. One half of the couple, usually the male lead, is an ordinary "working stiff" with

small-town sensibilities and traditional middle-class values, such as monogamy, democracy, egalitarianism, and rugged individualism. The female lead, on the other hand, generally is from a privileged background. At the outset, she's spoiled, impulsive, self-willed, and often eccentric. As the couple work together to solve the mystery, it becomes apparent that her manners are intentional affectations and that, fundamentally, her values are the same as his.

This message of class conflict resolution was particularly important to audiences in the 1930s, when the Depression heightened awareness of economic disparities. Films using the convention of a couple overcoming their ideological differences suggested to those audiences that they should not lose faith in the traditional American ideal of a classless utopian society (Schatz, 152).

The final convention of the screwball mystery that manifests itself in *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* is gender role confusion. In the genre, the female lead is self-assured and confident that she is on equal footing with her male counterpart. In fact, she is dominant and tends to control his every action. Occasionally, this is merely exasperating to the male lead and serves to fuel the antagonism that creates the sexual tension between the couple, but sometimes female domination takes a more extreme course and results in a complete reversal of traditional gender roles (Gehring, 15). Storylines often include several scenes in which the female lead barks out orders and commands while men scurry around, hurriedly trying to comply, as in the Howard Hawks film *His Girl Friday*. Sometimes, as if the verbal indicators of dominance and control are not enough to show role reversal, the genre employs the visual cues of cross-dressing.

In *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, both verbal and visual cues are abundantly evident. Nancy humiliates Ted in front of the River Heights police by making him appear to be a "mama's boy." She makes him spend the night in a dank cellar. She has him procure a gun for her, she commandeers his truck, and she orders him to tamper with evidence at the murder scene, an order with which he complies even though it's a felonious act.

To ensure that the role reversal is not lost on the audience, Ted appears in the River Heights police chief's office dressed in women's clothes. Nancy and her father happen to be in the chief's office when Ted is brought in by an officer who arrested him for this transgres-

sion. Ted tells Carson Drew that somebody "swiped" his clothes while he was sleeping in the cellar at the Turnbull mansion and that the satin Victorian gown, complete with bustle, was all he could find to cover himself so that he could leave the mansion after he awoke. He does not explain why he also donned the matching hat, placing it rakishly to one side, or why he also wore the bustle. Nancy, on the other hand, frequently wears trousers. While by contemporary standards pants are acceptable attire for women, in the 1930s they were considered somewhat daring, especially when Nancy is seen wearing pants nearly as often as Ted.

It's evident that the plot and characters in Benson's version of *The Hidden Staircase* were transformed from detective fiction to screwball comedy when the book became a film. The question is why?

Genre theory views filmmaking as a business. It's an enterprise comparable to any large industry and contends with virtually the same economic imperatives faced by General Motors or AT&T. Although filmmaking is an artistic endeavor, it is a commercial art; therefore, to economize and systematize production, its creators rely on proven formulas (Schatz, 5).

This view sees commercial filmmakers in close contact with their audience, whose response to individual films has affected the gradual development of story formulas and standard production practices. Film genres, such as the screwball mystery, the western, the musical, and the gangster film, are generated by a collective production system that honors these narrative traditions and develops them into basic conventions of feature-filmmaking for consumption by a mass audience (Schatz, vii). Economizing and systematizing production are measured by a filmmaker's capacity to reinvent established storytelling conventions. In other words, new forms and innovations are risky business ventures.

There are no new stories, only different characters resolving the timeless conflicts of people against people, people against nature, or people against themselves in different places at different times. A genre gives commercial filmmakers a cultural context for the story and characters in the form of "types," such as the scar-faced gangster in the pin-striped suit with wide lapels and spats, the strong but softspoken frontier sheriff, and the batty heroine of screwball comedies. It gives them the place—familiar settings, such as the main streets of desolate towns in the Old West or the comfort-

able mansions of the wealthy where murders inevitably take place. And it often gives them the time, as in westerns, which take place in lawless territories prior to statehood, and screwball comedies, which are set in times contemporary to their audiences. Genres systematize commercial filmmaking on the basis that success breeds success. The genre becomes the formula for success.

In 1934 MGM produced *The Thin Man*. Seeing its vast commercial success, other studios soon combined detective fiction and screwball comedy. Universal released *Remember Last Night?* in 1935, RKO came up with *The Ex-Mrs. Bradford* in 1936, Paramount contributed *True Confession* in 1937 (Sikov, 198), and Warner Brothers joined the fray with *Nancy Drew, Detective* in 1938.

In Nancy Drew, Warner Brothers undoubtedly saw the opportunity to co-opt a large share of the matinee audience with a character that already had a devoted following. A popular character plugged into a popular genre seemed destined for success. *Variety* touted the film *Nancy Drew, Detective* as "the first of a string of bread and butter pictures for the moppets" (*Variety Film Reviews*). The string ended at only four.

What went wrong with the formula? Nothing. It always worked when filmmakers followed it; the problem was that Warner Brothers didn't follow it. The success of *The Thin Man*, and others like it, came because the characters and plots were written expressly for the genre. In contrast, Nancy Drew underwent a metamorphosis in an attempt to mold her into the genre. Unfortunately, filmmakers at Warner Brothers failed to realize that Nancy Drew's appeal to the moppets, and others familiar with her through her books, was as a detective and not as a screwball comedian.

NOTE

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